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AUTHOR Narney, Pam
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ABSTRACT

A composition scholar conducted a study of peer response groups in a freshmen composition course to determine what leads to conflict among students in these groups. In the course of her study, however, she found herself deeply perplexed by conflicting roles she had to play as a participant/observer. The ethnographer as a participant/observer is, as the "slash or dash" often seen between the two words suggests, a person suffering from multiple personalities, a person with a divided self. In reality, the ethnographic stance is and should be a continual renegotiation of the divided selves: participant, observer, human being, teacher, researcher, learner, and writer. Just as the researcher cannot study student language in isolation, neither can she remove herself from the context, nor become a true member of the culture. She is "other"; age, her status as teacher/researcher and her taping equipment set her apart. A study about students, in other words, becomes also a study about the self. The researcher learns that she can go against her personality type (extrovert) and be stronger for it. The role of participant/observer requires a careful balancing act between engagement and reticence. This negotiation of different selves continues through the writing of the study, as the writer attempts to maintain the dignity and humanity of the subjects through what Clifford Geertz calls "thick description." (Contains 10 references.) (TB)

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THE DIVIDED SELF: OVERCOMING THE INTERNAL DIVISIONS IN THE ETHNOGRAPHIC PARTICIPANT/OBSERVER ROLE

ED 375 408

A paper presented at the Penn State Conference on Rhetoric & Composition

1994

by

Pam Narney

Northern Virginia Community College

How do researchers overcome the internal divisions that exist in the participant/observer role in composition ethnographies? Keeping within qualitative methods, what follows is a thick description of one participant/observer. This is not the concise definition I was looking for but is, in one sense, an ethnography of an ethnographer. My journey of self discovery began one day as I was moving through reading/writing groups in my first year composition class. The collegial peace was shattered as two 17 year old voices filled the room.

"That's funny!" Brian said.

"What??" asked Janet.

"What you wrote about, it's funny."

"No, it's not!"

"Death is funny to me."

"The suicide of my best friend is NOT funny!!"

"I just see death as funny."

"You're a friggin' idiot. What right have you got to say the death of my friend is funny. It's not funny. It's the most horrible thing that ever happened to me."

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"Death is funny and the way you wrote it is funny."

"HAH HAH! You're funny. You jerk."

Why were they yelling at each other? How could the trusting, caring learning climate that I had carefully constructed, built on sharing, supporting, and collaborating, disintegrate into such misunderstanding and hurt?

Questioning students afterward led nowhere. How did they get to this point? What comments were made? How could the gap between intended meaning and received meaning be so large?

This situation led me to question my interpretation of what was going on in my classroom groups when students discussed their papers. My motivating dissatisfaction was clear: what was the role of conflict in talk in peer response groups? I decided to get, as Sarah Freedman (1992) says, the insider's view. I wanted to see, feel, and experience the students' perspectives as they did, or at least come as close as I could. I believed that the naturally occurring talk in peer response groups would resemble normal conversation, but I needed to record the talk in the group context. The only way to find some answers was to enter their culture.

I wanted to know what students really talk about in their groups and how conflict facilitates or interferes with developing literacies. Because social constructionists believe that knowledge is socially generated and because that knowledge is the basis for literacy in a democratic society, contextualized talk became the data for my study. Focusing on the violent and visual eruptions of conflict led me to see the important role of differing perspectives or cognitive conflict in learning situations. Diaute and Dalton (1988, p.251) define cognitive conflict as "the

realization that one's perceptions, thoughts, or creations are inconsistent with new information or another person's point of view." If Brian and Janet had been able to see and understand (to take on) each others' perspectives, they would have been better able to resolve their differences in less personal and less hurtful ways.

To investigate the student culture I chose qualitative methods. I felt the ethnographic stance minimized my intrusion into the groups while supplying me with language as natural as I could get without resorting to surreptitiously wiring the classrooms for sound and recording without students' knowledge. This method would have violated the spirit of cooperation and community that formed the basis for the study.

The main problem I found with ethnography was defining the role of participant/observer and personally fitting myself into this research stance? Defining the role of participant/observer should have given me an action plan for my study, but instead, I found division among the experts.

The ethnographer must be directly involved in the subjects' lives and be able to see the insider point of view (Jorgensen, 1989)) and provide Geertz' (1973) "thick description." That thick description is based on how members make meaning and explain and interpret social actions in their own communities: in short, how they define their culture. Getting the insiders' view requires immersing oneself in the community being studied (Moss, 157) but avoiding "going native."

Saville-Troike (1982) stresses "adopting a functional role and becoming a participant" (109) in order to be accepted by the community but keeping a mental distance, a detached objectivity. North (1987, p. 139) counters with the idea that the detached observer should not be "an

observer as lens...[but rather] a methodological celebration of the individual consciousness as the sources of meaning--of 'lawful' order in human experience.... [He says that] authority lies not in its objectivity--the 'pure' use of language by observer-as-lens--but of a kind of collaboration whereby the life of the community finds articulation via phenomenal experience and the words of a single individual." Bogdan and Biklen (19182) describe "The Participant/Observer Continuum" (p. 127) where the ethnographer moves up and down the scale until she finds the right spot.

The ethnographer as participant/observer is, as the slash or dash often seen between the two words reveals, a person suffering, as I was, from multiple personalities; a person with a divided self.In reality, the ethnographic stance is and should be a continual renegotiation of the divided selves: participant, observer, human being, teacher, researcher, learner, and writer. It is a kind of collaboration, not only with the subjects of the study but within the participant/observer herself. Researchers have to daily, if not continually, relocate themselves and their stances within the multiple contexts they find themselves in. This involves a constant juggling act where the researcher must easily, comfortably, and unnoticeably move with the ebb and flow of the subjects, the contexts, and herself. Finding connections between these parts of my self proved to be an interesting and revealing unintended outcome of the study. Could a flaming extrovert take on the role of participant\observer and what was a participant/observer anyway?

Just as I could not study the language in isolation, neither could I remove myself from the context, nor become a true member of the culture. I

was other; age, my status as a teacher\researcher and my taping equipment set me apart. As a participant/observer I occupied a unique and singularly lonely place in the classroom.

How much interaction on my part was necessary, when, why, and for what (whose) purposes? My primary task was to observe, although I participated with each group or situation as needed. Occasionally students asked if I wanted to read their papers and comment on them, but they soon adjusted to the fact that I was not a teacher replacement.

Students questioned me and my ethics. "Don't say that in front of her. She'll tell our teacher!" they cried. Or, if they momentarily forgot my presence and said things their parents would not appreciate hearing, they would look at me and say, "You won't tell on us, will you?" This observer effect wore off quickly and I was accepted as a person who would keep their talk confidential. As heated arguments and details of group meetings were not leaked, students began to trust and accept me as a human being.

As human beings, participant/observers struggle with their needs as individuals and their needs to be social. Could I, a high involvement speaker, a flaming extrovert, successfully maneuver the rapids and undertows of the ethnographic stance? With my personality, could I become a listener? Could I sit idly by while students were struggling with a concept? Would I have to? I had to be continually wary and not become settled in or complacent, the subjects and the context did not allow that.

Collaboration between students and researcher brought with it a special charge to protect the dignity and authenticity of the humanity of the student/subjects. Dangers of misanalysis hung over me as I read a

microanalysis of one teacher's performance where, by distilling events, researchers were dehumanizing even degrading participants as they were turned into research subjects. I also think of Wendy Bishop's Something Old, Something New. I felt for those individuals under the microscope, because I knew some of them. I hoped that, like Bishop, I too could maintain the integrity and dignity of the students in my study through a thick description.

As a nontraditional graduate student I embraced process pedagogy because it fit what I knew, not how I was taught. But my latent current, or not so current, traditional bones struggled to understand how there could be validity in research without quantification. Ways With Words changed that for me. Its thick description put me into the communities. I soon realized that I would have to enter the learning community I was studying, no matter what my previous training had been.

Wary of my role as an epistemological linguistic missionary, whose past and present training produced my first personality split, I had to be aware of my personality as an extrovert. I also experienced other splits. My preferred learning style and my biases as a teacher (expert) also served as disconnecters. The ethnographic role increased my sense of connectedness by revealing joy in the human experience and helped me avoid dehumanizing the students as some micro ethnographers had done. As a believer in community versus distance, I felt a need for connectedness in the context. Context based connectedness filled my need for involvement but fought against my needs for independence (Tannen, 19).

As a reformed current traditionalist with a new process and social constructionist theory, who was still fighting off the process/ product

split, I had to deal with my preferred learning style which is oral, and depends on a questioning epistemology. Teachers tend to understand and appreciate students whose minds work like their own, and I was no exception. Was I privileging the talk of learners like me?

Embraced by contraries, my previous teacher training clashed with that part of me who was still a teacher as knowledge-giver and who wanted to lecture. My old teaching style of controller warred with my new role as facilitator or coach even as the participant/observer self pushed me farther into the role of watcher. Here I explored aspects of self not previously developed. How, when, where or why, should I or could I intervene?

As a participant/observer in another teacher's first year composition classroom for one year, studying the talk and conflicts in peer response groups, I continually felt the pull of currents trying to carry me off to my favored position: totally involved, talking, take charge person who wanted to make sure that all students were included and that no one suffered. In essence, the teacher.

The telling point occurred during one particularly quiet and painful peer response session. Students did not yet know and trust each other, or me, but were expected to respond to (evaluate) each other's work. The silences were long and painful. No one knew what to do or how to proceed. Naturally, the students turned to me for help.

"Pam, what does Bernadine mean when she says we're supposed to discuss our papers and make them better?" Sharyn asked.

Here I had to stifle my teacherly self. Being the only person in the room over 18 and an "expert" in response, I felt the pressure to ease their

suffering and entered the conversation.

How would my comments affect them? Would my talk be a betrayal of their trust or an affirmation of it? Would my talk be collaboration or domination? I had always been an active participant in the whole class activities, but the intimate situation of being in a closed room with five of someone else's students exerted such a burden that the current pulled me down and I led the discussion, gently, but I led. My reply was a five minute discourse on the glories and goals of collaboration, the writing process, and group work.

At the moment of delivery this speech felt like researcher as participator, however, when I listened to the tape that evening I heard myself from the researcher-as-observer perspective being the participant-as-controller of the culture. Students had gotten the word according to Narney. I had become the focus of study for that day and becoming the focus of study was not my professed aim. I wanted the insiders' view of the culture: what they said, how they interacted, how differing perspectives were rejected or accommodated, and how learning occurred. I had to back off and let them chart their own course or I would merely reveal what I already knew and my study would rubberstamp my own views. That was the first seductive trap to avoid.

As a researcher with a questioning epistemology I had to guard against my own personal way of knowing becoming a way of shaping the experiences I was observing. When I found myself concentrating on students with personalities and traits similar to mine I forced myself to more closely study the silent, low involvement speakers, and students whose learning styles were more concrete or problem solution centered than my holistic

view. Introspection and detailed study of the transcripts, rough drafts, and revised drafts revealed that silent group members were learning too. Although uncovering their learning was more difficult because it was so completely internalized. That was a great challenge. Remaining unbiased was a matter of forcing myself to look into other ways of knowing.

Aware that students were testing me and bursting to talk to someone, I had to become ethnographer as introvert. When asked by the teacher about the study I would gush, "Today, the most interesting exchange occurred...oops, sorry, I can't talk about it." We circumvented our interest and desire to talk about the group talk by writing to each other in a teacher-researcher dialogic journal. At first, I reread my comments and occasionally excerpted sensitive bits that would reveal student talk or confidences. Censoring my talk and journal writing was difficult: it cut against the grain of my naturally voluble and open conversational style, but I let myself go completely in field notes and memory notes to myself.

As a writer telling their story, I had to be fair to the students. The test would be when the students read it. Could I maintain the dignity and humanity of my subjects? Would my study be a mirror of their ways of knowing or a reflection of my own?

Help was available because the very act of transcription changed the naturally occurring talk into a script, a fixed, textual artifact, while the talk itself was ephemeral, passionate, and alive. Ethnographers must be careful to keep their biases and beliefs from affecting their results. As a process teacher who believes in the connection between thought and language, I relied on the transcriptions to check my biases because my "expectations [could] not magically transform themselves into a script"

(Stubbs, p. 43). The script existed on its own. Although the script allowed for a microanalysis of the talk, it could not convey the social interaction of the human spirits involved. The thick description recontextualized the talk and infused in with the life of the students.

As a Type A personality it was difficult to believe my advisors when they affirmed that in an ethnographic study, if you find nothing, nothing is a legitimate finding. Armed with blind faith, I had to trust myself to let the talk develop organically without influencing it, even though my very presence changed the talk. Restraining my usual self was a challenge.

My extroverted self was unleashed in hall and cafeteria conversations where I could more comfortably be myself and be more involved in the conversations. These mini interviews released my pent up desires to talk but also acted a s a check on my theories and inferences. In the hallway I was an equal participant, no tape recorder, just conversational partners. but I was a partner who experienced reality checks from students. I was in their context and community but not a true part of it.

Just as I could not study the language in isolation, so I could not remove myself from the context. Unlike a person who enters a completely alien culture and needs to be an active participant to be accepted, I had to be accepted more in the role of observer while they were in their autonomous groups. Neither could I become a member of the culture. I was other and it was a lonely place.

The introduction to this study announces that it is the story of six voices. There were five students in my focal group and readers ask, why six. The sixth perspective, of course, is mine. Through the writing I had to construct meaning from all of these perspectives. I found the lens or

camera metaphor useful, but sometimes I felt that I stepped back so far back that I was observing myself in the culture.

At times, I walked out from behind the camera to be framed as part of the picture. I was photographer, camera, lens, participant, and observer of the fluid process.

The harsh light of objectivity I had hoped to shed on the culture clashed with the soft focus of the humanity of the students. But, sometimes, no matter how I held the camera or where I was framed in relation to the picture, I could not focus the lens and had to walk away and look back from a greater distance. I was observing myself observing the students. My field notes reveal a constant battle between my desire to be part of the group and my desire to observe the talk and actions in context in as pure a form as possible.

Just as I was getting into a comfortable routine of balancing all of my hats, participant/observer, human, learner, teacher, and writer, or wearing several hats at a time, my teacher threw me a curve. Prior to Session 11, Bernadine felt a need to introduce Writers' Questions. An activity she successfully used in each class but which, I had asked her to leave out because it controlled the talk.

Writers' Questions were questions prepared ahead of time for the group. Prior to this, the groups had been totally on their own, autonomous, even holding their group sessions in separate classrooms without teacher intervention or presence. These Writers' Questions, did, in effect, script and control the talk. Instead of owning and asking their own questions, group members responded to questions writers had crafted. This all but shut down the talk.

By the middle of the first session for that day, in week 12 of the study, the students were faltering. Talk was slowing down and was punctuated with long silences. Normal interaction pauses had been established by groups at one to three seconds, some of the pauses in this session stretched to 28 seconds.

Sharyn asked her first Writers' Question,

Sharyn: I have questions here somewhere. OK. Where is more detail needed? The whole thing, right?

Pause of 5 seconds

Cher: Umm. Talk about which semester maybe, build up to the importance of the game, or something?

Responses that had previously been personal, elaborated and focused were vague and rambling. Suggestions were less explicit.

Sharyn continued: OK, is there anywhere where there is too much detail?

Pause of 14 seconds followed by two short and vague replies.

Sharyn: Do you think that, umm, the ending can be more improved?

Pause of 9 seconds

Luke: I think it sounds real good.

The stops and starts, the long drawn out pauses showed that the conversation was breaking down. The "It's fine" responses were reminiscent of their early response group meetings and signaled a return to less involved response patterns. They had progressed beyond these responses to giving and receiving long elaborated explanations to their questions, with oral composing and examples for the writer. They had argued companionably about interpretations of the essays and meaning. Now the talk was dead.

Initial pauses were eight or nine seconds long. After the pause a

group member would answer yes or no, good, or fine and the process continued. Students began focusing on the questions the writer was asking instead of the paper she had written.

The entire response process was dying. I felt a rising tension to intervene. Twelve seconds can be an amazingly long period of time. For me, it was like watching the movie version of Waiting For Godot, in slo-o-o-w motion.

Mercifully, Sharyn announced that she was done with her paper and they moved on to Geoff's. Geoff read his paper, which he thought was about love but which every female in the group felt was about the male ego. The stunned silence after the reading was horrifying. Everyone was waiting to hear his first question. No one spoke. Finally, after a pause of nine seconds, Geoff asked: Anything that doesn't flow or doesn't seem appropriate?

During the silence that followed eye contact was scrupulously avoided. Students were studying their notebooks, their own papers, the clock on the wall, and their baseball hats. Realizing their painful dilemma, I too, averted my gaze from their faces and studied my shoes, wondering why I had chosen this particular pair for that day.

The internal debate began. They are in trouble. Response has broken down. Geoff has asked a question that everyone has a response to, but no one wants to be the first to say that his title about love contradicts his examples of male selfishness.

Five more seconds passed.

I looked up to see that no one was looking at any other person. Geoff studied his sheets of paper. Time crawled on.

Five more seconds passed.

A voice inside my head screamed: "Do something. You're the one with expertise here. Help them out of this painful and potentially embarrassing situation."

The silences loomed above me like the presence of an elephant who had one foot planted on my chest and was gently and gradually shifting all of his weight onto that foot. Silence was squeezing the life, the creative tension, the community out of the group and was unbearable. No student wanted to take the risk of speaking first and offending Geoff. He was sincere in his belief that his paper was unified and coherent. I felt the discomfort of the other students as they tried to come up with answers.

Ten seconds passed.

Finally I could bear it no longer and asked:

Can I ask you, what is the most sacrificial bachelor?

Geoff: That's someone who is willing to give up a lot of things, a bachelor, who's most sacrificial is giving up a lot of things even if he's giving up a lot of free time, money, everything like that, wants, you know.

This was only the second time I had intervened in sessions of my own volition.

If I were in that situation again, I would still break the silence, just to relieve the tension on the group members. I had become enough of a part of their community to feel their pain and to want to move beyond it. I knew I had to make one attempt to keep the conversation going. That one question was all I allowed myself, but it had little influence on them. Nothing changed. Pauses became longer and longer: some stretching to 35

seconds. It was not their finest moment. Fortunately, at their next session they tacitly rejected Writers' Questions and returned to their earlier response patterns.

What I learned from this, as I overcame the internal divisions within myself and within my researcher role, was a study of self. I learned that I could go against my personality type and be stronger for it. The introspection inherent in the ethnographic stance led me to discover that the thick description helps maintain the dignity and humanity of the subjects. Recontextualizing the talk gave depth and understanding to readers experiencing the group sessions. Writing the study proved that participant/observer is not one role but many. Those many selves unite in a journey of exploration that is not limited to the subjects of the study. The ethnographer, through introspection, through participation and through observation becomes part of the community of learners. These students, these budding writers had become more than students, more than subjects; we were connected. I was, whether I wanted to be or not, part of their community in a way they were not aware of. They had let me into their intellectual lives, and without them, their writing, their ideas, and their words, no study would have been possible. As Bernadine would say, "we were like a 'little family.'"

As a result of my study I am intimately familiar with learning styles different from my own. My research questions and my purpose for being in someone else's classroom reinforced my charge: to represent as fairly and completely as possible the learners and their struggles.

Even though I thought that this classroom would be part of my culture, it was not. It was as exotic and as unknown to me as the culture of an

aboriginal tribe. My written report, through "the novelizing voice of the writer" (Bakhtin), had to be a mirror of their actions and not a reflection of my own beliefs. The truest test was students' interpretation of the study. As they read and agreed with what I saw and heard, I knew that a part of their culture had been captured.

The selves of the divided researcher were made whole in the writing process and became as Saville-Troike states, a problem "of moving the techniques of ethnography to our own society" (170). The deeper understanding of the culture comes through the relationship within the community. The outsider was insider, the teacher was learner, the researcher had become a part of what was being studied, the extrovert could, at times be an introvert. Just as the language and action in this study were not static so the ethnographer's role is not static. It is a repertoire of mixed, personal and human methods which combine to cope with the ever changing flow of the human experience.

Yes, I resolved. I could avoid interfering, because I knew that the constant streams of the roles I played would always be in me. I merely had to remember that I was there to learn the insider's view, not to become it.

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